

# Practicing Humanities

*Antje Gimmler*

*is a professor in Applied Philosophy at the Department of Learning and Philosophy and director of the Center for Applied Philosophy, both at Aalborg University. In her research within social and political philosophy, philosophy of health and technology as well as applied philosophy of science she focuses on the collaboration of philosophy with other disciplines and with practitioners.*

## Abstract

In contemporary societies, the humanities are under constant pressure and have to justify their existence. In the ongoing debates, Humboldt's ideals of 'Bildung' and 'pure science' are often used to justify the unique function of the humanities of ensuring free research and contributing to a vital and self-reflective democracy. Contemporary humanities have adopted a new orientation towards practices, and it is not clear how this fits with the ideals of 'Bildung' and 'pure science'. A possible theoretical framework for this orientation towards practices could be found in John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy. Contrary to Humboldt's idea that the non-practical is the most practical in the long run, philosophical pragmatism recommends to the humanities to situate knowledge in practices and apply knowledge to practices.

**Keywords** History of the humanities, Dewey, Humboldt, pragmatism, practices

## Ideal and Crisis

Nowadays the humanities are not only under constant pressure to justify their existence; they are also under constant transformation. In terms of new technologies and methods, the humanities are demonstrating a stunning openness. (Pedersen, Køppe and Stjernfelt 2015). Digital humanities could be said to be the latest development of the adaptive and transformative nature of the humanities (Holm, Jarrick and Scott 2015). This heterogeneity was not always present in the humanities. Or at least, this is not what 'the humanities' and the 'liberal arts' have represented since they were installed by the Humboldt reforms in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. 'Pure science' and 'Bildung' are seen as the cornerstones of the humanities and are still playing a decisive role in the discussion about the reorientation and reorganization of the humanities (Fish 2008; Small 2013).

It seems that the ideal of 'Bildung' has lost its magic power and attraction for university planners and politicians. In most countries, the goal of contemporary university education is rather to qualify students for a profession and the labor market than to ensure their general 'Bildung'. Universities have certainly changed tremendously over the past 20 years; Martha Nussbaum (2010) called this development a "silent crisis". 'Pure science', the other core ideal of the humanities, has been questioned as well. The so-called 'Mode 2', which was already diagnosed by Gibbons, Limoges and Nowotny in 1994, is not limited to the natural and the social sciences; this new orientation towards application and social as well as economic impact also affects the humanities (Gibbons, Limoges and Nowotny 1994, 90 ff.).

One of the many transformations of the humanities that can be identified is a transformation towards practical orientation. This is seen, for instance, in the collaboration of the humanities with design. Humanistic research is beginning to play a valuable part in economic value production. Are the humanities able to profit from this new practice orientation, and what might their profit be? Some will argue that this is the only method of survival for the humanities, while others are warning that the humanities will lose their identity (Derewiewicz 2015; Fish 2008). Are the 'new' humanities still characterized by the traditional ideals of 'Bildung' and 'pure science'? This question cannot be answered by a simple yes or no.

In this article, I shall pursue the modest ambition of sketching a theoretical framework that might enable us to evaluate what practical orientation could contribute to the humanities. The theoretical framework is meant to contribute to the ongoing rearticulation and transformation of the humanities in a productive way. The premise of this article is therefore that practical orientation is part of the revitalization of the humanities. In the first part, I shall take a closer look at the Humboldt university reform and the ideals of 'Bildung' and 'pure science'. In the next part, I shall introduce what has been coined 'the practice term' and shall then use the pragmatism of John Dewey as a radicalized form of the practice turn in order to understand the practical engagement of the humanities as not merely market driven utilization but as a theoretical challenge and a contribution to the ongoing revitalization of the humanities.

### **'Bildung' and 'pure science' – uselessness as a necessary principle?**

Are Humboldt's ideal of 'Bildung' and his understanding of the humanities still relevant as normative ideals for universities today? Of course, this depends upon what is meant by the Humboldt ideals of 'Bildung' and 'pure science'. Usually, four fundamental claims characterize Humboldt's idea of university teaching and research: the freedom of teaching and learning, the unity of research and teaching, the unity of science and scholarship, and the primacy of 'pure' science, i.e. the absence of utility or use as the motivation and goal of science (Ash 2006). A fifth claim that is connected to Humboldt's idealistic humanism could be added: it is the assumption that the humanities provide the means for individuals to be capable of self-realization in a reflective way. This claim can be found, for instance, in the defense of the humanities which has been expressed by Martha Nussbaum (2010), and which can be traced down to Humboldt's idea of education as the ultimate means of realizing humanity and human mankind as such. But as also Ash (2006) has outlined, the very idealistic connotation that Humboldt's ideal has achieved over time hides the more profane tensions and contradictions between the ideal and its reality.

First, it should be mentioned that Humboldt's educational reform of the university was a reaction to the decline of the university system in Germany in the 17th and 18th centuries (Nipperdey 1983, 57).

The Prussian reforms from 1807 – 1821 constitute the second historically relevant background. The reform of the entire educational system, including the universities, constituted a corner stone of the general reforms that the Prussian State initiated after the devastating results of the Napoleonic wars (Mieck 1981). The Prussian bureaucracy needed properly educated civil servants and functionaries, and the schools and higher education institutions needed teachers and professors trained in systematic knowledge acquisition. Third, the educational reform should also be seen against a broader political background: Germany had not been a political nation state, and the philosophical humanism of Humboldt and others replaced the political unification by cultural unification (Plessner 1959). The Prussian educational reform, pragmatically driven by the need for re-organization of the country, found its ideological underpinnings in the idea that higher education provides citizens with a national awareness that takes the form of language, culture and mentality. Humboldt calls this the realization of humanity in the individual (*“Begriff der Menschheit in unsrer Person”*, Humboldt 1960, 235).

Today, when Humboldt is referred to when explaining the necessity of the humanities, what is attractive is precisely the idea of integration of individuality within the greater scheme of civil society and humankind, as well as the utilization of the creative potential that lies in studying languages and cultures of different historical epochs and cultural backgrounds (e.g. Nussbaum 2010). This includes the distance to the world of labor and to the market, which is a *‘Leitmotiv’* in Humboldt’s thought. Contemporary criticism of the upcoming industrial society with its bourgeois values of efficiency and profit forms the context of this distance to vocation. Humboldt’s thinking has sometimes been called aristocratic (Kost 2004, 147f.); this assessment contains an implicit critique of the ideal of *‘Bildung’*.

What does *‘Bildung’* actually mean for Humboldt? The instrument to realize *‘Bildung’* was the foundation of the Berlin University (1809/10) along the principles which have already been mentioned: the freedom of teaching and research, the unity of research and teaching, the unity of science and scholarship, and the dominance of *‘pure science’*. *‘Bildung’* in Humboldt’s understanding is not a fixed goal but rather a lifelong process that the individual realizes as a reflective way of leading her life. It is the capacity to not merely

make well-informed judgments, which would only be the result of material education (factual knowledge). Rather the goal is to enable the individual to make judgments that reflect her uniqueness and autonomy. This is only achieved with formal education where principles and not merely information are taught (Humboldt 1960; Kjær-gaard/Kristensen 2003, 92f.). In his well-known idealistic manner, Humboldt believes that every human being possesses an active spirit that is seeking for truth. It is in art and language, in the symbolic universe, that the human spirit recognizes and reflects truth and itself (Humboldt 1960). Here Humboldt stands in the tradition of Platonic-Aristotelian metaphysics: pure theory reveals the reasonable order of reality, while instrumental practice (*poiesis*) is bound to pure chance and failure. This down-playing of practical activities had a tremendous influence on education, and we will see that this is one of the main features that had been criticized by pragmatism.

For Humboldt, it was clear that the danger of alienation to nature lurks behind an activity that is not centered in the individual itself (Humboldt 1960, 237). 'Poiesis' is, so to speak, potentially a dangerous activity that could allow the outer world to assume power over the individual. For Humboldt, the humanities guarantee for a totality of knowledge that is not scattered into bits and pieces but demonstrates inner coherence. And here the other corner stone of Humboldt's new type of university becomes important. 'Bildung' can only be realized as 'pure science'. It is an approach to science that is theoretical, not interested in practical purposes, economic profit or other forms of utility (Humboldt 1809/10). 'Pure science' is free research, not only in the humanities, but also in the natural sciences. From the orientation to 'Wissenschaft' or 'pure science' follows also that teaching cannot be isolated from research, which is intrinsically an open endeavor. The unity of research and teaching turns both professors and students into researchers (Humboldt 1960). This is an ideal that has been most influential and still is, also for modern universities (Ash 2006).

For Humboldt, 'Bildung' as the educational ideal that is non-vocational and defined by distance to utilization guarantees that the student will be able to realize individuality and humanity. This was the revolutionary thought of Humboldt: only by being disinterested in what purpose one's education could serve will the student learn to gain the autonomy to fulfill different purposes in the long run. This

also applies to 'pure science'. The absence of direct interests of an economic or societal nature opens for the researcher's autonomy and truth seeking. The absence of purpose and utility in Humboldt's ideal also excludes the interests and needs of societies. In Humboldt's understanding, societies are best served by humanities not being directly oriented towards societal problems (Humboldt 1809/1810). As also outlined by Habermas (1968), this idealistic self-understanding of the humanities is flawed. The idea of 'pure science' maintains the strong belief that pure theory is able to represent the world as totality. Therefore, for Humboldt, 'Bildung' is most practical precisely because it is non-practical. Habermas criticizes this understanding of theory by demonstrating the hidden interests behind the allegedly neutral theory. According Habermas' analysis, science and humanities are always already bound to interests. He recommends a critical and emancipatory interest that guides the process of knowledge acquisition. In his approach, the emancipatory interest complements the technical interest of the natural sciences and the self-understanding of the hermeneutics in humanities.

But what if humanities themselves become practically oriented? Do they have to part with the critical spirit and the ideals of humanity?

### **Pragmatism and Practice Turn – approaches to practices**

As already mentioned, parts of contemporary humanities do embrace new technologies and look for a more practical orientation. And it should be pointed out that this is not a development that is first and foremost the result of political pressure to ensure that humanistic graduates are able to find jobs. Humanities that are seeking new grounds and are transgressing their boundaries could be seen to be part of the contemporary "ongoing rearticulation of the role of the humanities" (Ekström, in this volume) which is already taking place.

Yet, it is not always clear what type of theoretical orientation could support the practice orientation of the humanities. Obviously, the humanities have always dealt with practices, but mostly with narrating and interpreting practices. Seeing interpretation itself as a practice and recognizing that there is more to practices than text represents an orientation switch that is in the center of a recent broad theoretical movement called the 'practice turn' (Schatzki



et al. 2001). 'Practice turn' is an umbrella term that covers quite different approaches, such as Bourdieu's sociology or Latour's actor-network-theory. Their common ground is that practices shift from being narrated and interpreted as explanandum to being part of the explanans itself. Andreas Reckwitz (2002) has proposed the systematization of the practice turn or, as he prefers to phrase it, 'practice theory'. Practice theory "revises the hyperrational and intellectualized picture of human agency and the social offered by classical and high-modern social theories. Practice theory 'decentres' mind, texts and conversation. Simultaneously, it shifts bodily movements, things, practical knowledge and routine to the centre of its vocabulary." (Reckwitz 2002, 259). The 'practice turn' includes the broadening of the humanities in terms of methodology, theoretical approach, and subject matter. An even more radicalized practical approach has been developed by the classical pragmatist John Dewey (Gimmmler 2012).

From Dewey's perspective, the use of new technologies and tools does not necessarily change the self-understanding of the humanities. A real change would demand that the humanities not only develop knowledge in practical contexts but also apply knowledge in these. The result of this operation would be a learning process:

"To 'learn from experience' is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction--discovery of the connection of things." (Dewey 2008c, ch. 11)

In contrast to Humboldt, Dewey sees learning and research not as a development towards a pre-given goal, a "ready-made latent principle" (Dewey 2008c, ch. 4, 2). For Dewey, learning is an open and experimental process that unfolds between the individual and the environment. The core principle of this process is experience, and experience is always situated within practices. Experience unfolds as an activity between an organism and its environment, it is not merely a form of perception or an epistemological stance to-

wards the objective world. Three dimensions of experience can be distinguished in Dewey's philosophy:

The first dimension is the experience of something in a situation; this is what Dewey calls primary or immediate experience: "Experience is double-threaded in the sense that in its primary wholeness, it does not differentiate between act and material, subject and object. It includes both in its unanalysed totality." (Dewey 2008a, 18). Experience demonstrates qualities that are experienced as specific, for instance with the body and the senses. Experiences are thus situated. A situation, for Dewey, is characterized by being a disruption of the usual way of acting. Primary or immediate experience takes a heuristic function and sets the stage for further experiences. Applied to humanistic research, it follows that the sensitivity to identify disruptions has to be refined, and the definition of relevant problems should employ a broad range of methodologies.

The next dimension of experience is best described as 'to be experienced in something'. Experience in this sense is sedimented in recipes, in tools and in the body (Dewey 2008a, 21 ff.). Experience is often tacit knowledge. An artist 'knows' how to treat the material and the tool she is using. Experience of this practical and physical but not exclusively linguistic kind is present in three contexts: first, in tools, second, in the artefact or product, and third, in the activity. This dimension of experience would allow the artist to incorporate practices of different kinds and to go beyond the purely contemplative stance towards products of culture or symbolic systems.

The third dimension of Dewey's understanding of experience has Hegelian traits (Gimmmler 2004). Interacting with the world, we also make experiences with ourselves, reflecting our ideas and investing hypotheses or theories. Within the framework of research as a process, Dewey outlines this third dimension of experience as the controlled production of knowledge, for example through experiment, statistical investigation and other methods (Dewey 2008a, 105ff.). For Dewey it is decisive that with reflected experience, human beings control actions and at the same time gain knowledge about themselves. Taking this experimental approach, self-reflection in the humanities would be contested in a productive way.

Taking Dewey's theory of experience into account, traditional philosophy could be said to have cultivated irrelevance as a distinguished virtue. What is lacking in traditional philosophy for Dewey



is, oddly enough, learning. In his view, philosophy should become empirical. Bringing the results of a process of experience back into experience and making them useful for practices would strengthen the validity of philosophical ideas. A look at the natural sciences could help to understand this point. From Dewey's point of view, the natural sciences are not successful because they achieve true representations of the natural world; as a matter of fact, Dewey was very critical about the positivist understanding of the natural sciences. The success of the natural sciences lies in their experimental use of experience in order "to have a new empirical situation in which objects are differently related to each other, and such that the consequences of directed operations have the property of being known" (Dewey 2008b, 70). However, the blind application of the scientific method as such is not Dewey's goal. The experimental orientation to philosophy recommended by Dewey could also be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the humanities. Reflected integration of humanistic research and education into the practices that regulate, stimulate and develop societies in a more direct and active way could be one of the results of Dewey's theory of experience. Firstly, a pragmatic version of the humanities would put cultural symbols back into practices. Secondly, pragmatists would acknowledge the collaborative and collective nature of these practices. And thirdly, pragmatists would suggest that also the humanities should use their theories and interpretations to improve democratic practices; this is the melioristic aim of pragmatism. It is clear from this short presentation of Dewey's pragmatism that the humanities should not confine themselves to purely theoretical constructions. The Humboldt paradox of impractical theory being the most practical is not supported by Dewey.

### Concluding remarks

If philosophy and the humanities were to put their theories to test, what would philosophy and the humanities gain? First of all, it should be stated that the main arena for humanistic theories, concepts, ideas, and narration is the scientific community and the public debate. This is completely legitimate from Dewey's point of view. However, a more rigorous reading of Dewey's theory would emphasize the practical grounding of the humanities. Let me concentrate on two major changes which, according to the pragmatic

theory of experience, are connected with the new orientation in humanities towards practices: First, the introduction of experience-based humanities would situate the humanities in a broader spectrum of interactions with the world. The definition of a relevant research problem is only possible on the basis of a full range of experience. If the latter is not available, the problem definition is always in danger of repeating text book problems and being detached from real world problems. Recent approaches within the 'practice turn' reflect this and focus much more on materialities of experience, without leaving the symbolic dimension of meaning aside (Rinkinen, Jalal and Shove 2015). Secondly, not only the basis of humanistic research in the richness of experience is advocated by Dewey; it is also recommended to bring the results back to real life practices in order to validate humanistic theories and ideas. The latter seems to be problematic: 'Testing' a hypothesis in historical science is not possible in the same way as a hypothesis is tested in chemistry. But actually this is what happens in design-oriented humanities: The semantic classifications that are used to establish a structured data collection are tested in computer software. Digital or design humanities might be one type of humanities among others that is experimenting with new methods, thus changing the outlook on the humanities. The plurality of approaches and an academic community flourishing with heterogeneity rather than with homogeneity could be one result of this development.

The aim of this article was to contribute to an understanding of the changes humanities are currently undergoing. The practice turn that decenters our focus from texts and symbols to the richness of all sorts of experiences is one step in this direction. Dewey's theory of experience enables us to conceptualize this change as a radical one. The Humboldt paradox that 'Bildung' and 'pure science' should not address practical goals directly and is precisely therefore able to be practical in a deeper sense, is highly questionable from the pragmatic point of view. Dewey's philosophy could provide a framework for conceptualizing the humanities beyond the simple alternatives of 'pure science' and 'applied science'; juxtaposing these alternatives always insinuates that 'pure science' is based on truth seeking, while 'applied science' is contaminated by the nasty odor of being subordinated to economic constraints. Dewey's concept of philosophy applied to the humanities aims at

including intellectual achievements into everyday life experience. With this ideal, he would want the humanities to collaborate with other fields of science, including the natural sciences and engineering. This would enable certain parts of the humanities to enter into a radical relationship of practice and would finally depart from the contemplative understanding of knowledge. Theoretical concepts and ideas will then be subjugated to strict operationalization that takes seriously the pragmatic motto that a concept is understood only when one sees the consequences of its work.

## References

- Ash, Mitchell G. 2006. "Bachelor of What, Master of Whom? The Humboldt Myth and Historical Transformations of Higher Education in German-Speaking Europe and the US", *European Journal of Education*, Vol 41: 2.
- Deresiewicz, William. 2015. "How College Sold Its Soul and Surrendered to the Market", *Harper's Magazine*, September, 25-32.
- Dewey, John. 2008a. *Experience and Nature, Later Works*, Vol. 1, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, John. 2008b. *The Quest for Certainty, Later Works*, Vol. 4, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, John. 2008c. *Democracy and Education* (1916), e-book, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/852/852.txt>
- Fish, Stanley. 2008. "Will the Humanities Save Us?" *The New York Times*, January 6. [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/will-the-humanities-save-us/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/06/will-the-humanities-save-us/?_r=0)
- Gibbons, Michael, Limoges, Camille, and Helga Nowotny. 1994. *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*, London: Sage Publishers.
- Gimmmler, Antje. 2004. "Hegel as Pragmatist". In *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy* edited by Bill Egginton, et al. Albany N.Y., SUNY, 47-66.
- Gimmmler, Antje. 2012. "Pragmatisme og 'practice turn'", *Slagmark – Tidsskrift for idéhistorie*, Vol. 64, 43-60.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1968. *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp
- Holm, Poul, Jarrik, Arne and Dominik Scott. 2015. *Humanities World Report*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Humboldt, Wilhelm von. 1809/10. *Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin*: <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/docviews/abstract.php?lang=ger&id=30376>
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von. 1960. *Theorie der Bildung des Menschen. Werke in fünf Bänden*, Bd. I, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 234-240.
- Kjærgaard, Peter C. og Jens Erik Kristensen. 2003. „Universitetets idéhistorie“. In *Universitet og videnskab* edited by Hans Fink Kjærgaard, Peter C. Kjærgaard, Helge Kragh og Erik Kristensen. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag, 31-144.
- Kost, Jürgen. 2004. *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Weimarer Klassik. Bürgerliches Bewußtsein*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.
- Mieck, Ilja. 1981. „Zielsetzung und Ertrag der preussischen Reformen“, In *Preussen. Beiträge zu einer politischen Kultur*, edited by Manfred Schlenke, Hamburg: Rowohlt, 181-196.
- Nipperdey, Thomas. 1983. *Deutsche Geschichte 1800-1866. Bürgerwelt und starker Staat*, München: C.H.Beck.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2010. *Not for profit. Why democracy needs the Humanities*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Pedersen, David Budtz, Køppe, Simon, and Frederik Stjernfelt ed. 2015. *Kampen om Disciplinerne. Viden og Videnskabelighed i Humanistisk Forskning*, København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Plessner, Helmuth. 1959. *Die verspätete Nation. Über die politische Verführbarkeit bürgerlichen Geistes*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Reckwitz, Andreas. 2002. “Toward a Theory of Social Practices”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 2: 243-263.
- Rinkinen, Jenny, Jalal, Mikko and Elizabeth Shove. 2015. “Object Relations in Accounts of Everyday Life”, *Sociology*, Vol. 49,5: 870-885.
- Schatzki, Theodore et al. 2001. *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, Florence, KY, USA: Routledge.
- Small, Helen. 2013. *The Value of the Humanities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.